

# ‘A man of large appetites’: the Cyclops in popular culture

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The single eye of the Cyclops Polyphemos has cast its fascinating charm on us throughout the history of Western culture. Narratives including the Cyclops appear in paintings and sculptures, poems and novels, operas and ballets. These representations stem from two distinct traditions. One, found in Theocritus *Idylls*, and more fully in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (13.738-897), tells of Polyphemos’ spurned ardour for the sea-nymph Galatea. In Ovid’s version, after setting out his suit in a song, he discovers her in the arms of her (thoroughly unmonstrous) young lover Acis. The giant crushes the youth with a rock, but Galatea transforms Acis into the river that bears his name. The Cyclops is portrayed as clumsy and unsophisticated, with the murder of Acis a crime of passion rather than wickedness. Other versions have Galatea finally accepting her massive suitor, and bearing to him a son, Galates, later to become ancestor of the Gauls. This romantic Beauty and the Beast-type narrative has been immensely popular with artists and poets since the earliest days of the European cultural tradition. Its pastoral setting prompted early depictions of Galatea as shepherdess to Polyphemos’ shepherd, while for later artists, the idea of the nymph conquering the giant suggested its use as Romantic allegory for nature disarming the ignorant monster of civilization.

The other tradition, found in Book 9 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, paints a different picture. In Odysseus’ story, Polyphemos is blasphemous and cannibalistic, a figure of extreme appetites which eventually prove to be his downfall. If the Galatea tradition shows the physical monstrosity of the Cyclops, this episode demonstrates the ethical outrages which set him aside from the Greeks: his lack of respect for the gods and refusal to comply with laws of hospitality. It is this second tradition of the Cyclops as monster that has more recently become most prominent in popular culture (especially cinema) and, following this, in popular knowledge of antiquity.

## A dwarf elephant

In the twentieth century, two opposing approaches to the Cyclops emerged. The first proposed a scientific explanation for the figure, the palaeontologist Othenio Abel suggesting that the skulls of Pleistocene dwarf elephants (often found in coastal caves in Italy and Greece) might have been mistaken by shipwrecked sailors for the remains of a one-eyed giant: the nasal cavity being taken for a single eye-socket. The second approach held that, rather than explaining monsters, science might create them. This prompted the popularity of science-fiction and fantasy films and comics in the 1950s and 1960s peopled with monstrous creatures. Typical of this trend is the 1957 film *The Cyclops* in which the pilot of a crashed ‘plane with a cargo of uranium is discovered in the South American jungle, hideously deformed and mutated. The Cyclops also featured in the myth-inspired peplum movies (called ‘peplum’ after the extremely short tunics worn by the male actors). These were mostly made in Italy and featuring bodybuilders cast in the leading roles. In *Maciste vs. the Cyclops* (1961, a.k.a. *Atlas Against the Cyclops and Monster from the Unknown World*) the hero is required to rescue the descendant of Odysseus from the vengeful descendant of Polyphemos. While the pepla cast actors in unconvinc-

ing costumes for their monsters, the animator Ray Harryhausen used stop-motion animation for his fantastic figures. For *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) he created a Cyclops that combined monstrous elements from various sources: in addition to the single eye, this figure has a horn and the legs of a satyr.

In these films the Cyclops figure is primarily an object of spectacle. He demonstrates cinema’s role as a provider of fantasy, able to show its audience something they cannot see in real life. However, there have been films where the figure of the Cyclops is used in a more sophisticated fashion: the Italian/American production *Ulysses* (1954) starring Kirk Douglas and the Coen brothers’ *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000) are examples. Both films use the Cyclops episode to discuss issues of impiety, hospitality (*xenia*) and excess.

In *Ulysses*, the giant figure is played by an actor, with the monstrous elements conveyed by a combination of make-up, editing and clever camera angles. On his entrance, Ulysses declares ‘I ask you to respect the laws of hospitality – Zeus the Avenger.’ In response, Polyphemos is contemptuous of Zeus, saying that he is ‘son of Neptune’ and refusing to supply the guest-gifts requested. As in the *Odyssey*, the Cyclops’ downfall is caused here by his excessive drinking. Once the giant is in an alcoholic stupor, the sharpened stake is driven into the Cyclops’ single eye. However while the epic takes more than twenty lines to describe the act, the film achieves the same effect in moments (albeit offscreen) with the gruesome sound of sizzling flesh.

## The host from hell

*O Brother Where Art Thou?* has as its protagonists three escapees from a chain gang in the Depression era American South. It describes itself as ‘inspired by Homer’, using the poem as only one of a variety of sources. The Cyclops figure here is ‘Big Dan Teague’, a bible salesman with an eyepatch (played by John Goodman). The hero, Ulysses Everett McGill, and his companion Delmar have provided lunch for Big Dan; in return he has promised to tell them how to make money from selling bibles, but in fact proceeds to beat them with a tree branch and steal their money. Rather than Greek *xenia*, it is ‘old-fashioned Southern hospitality’ that is breached here while impiety is portrayed by the bible salesman’s exploitation of the religious poor. Big Dan is also a gluttonous eater, sucking voraciously on bones. However, his eventual downfall is not his gluttony, but his excessive arrogance, exemplified by his belief in white supremacy. Attending a Ku Klux Klan gathering where a black friend of Everett and his companions is about to be lynched, Big Dan looks likely to be blinded by a flying flagpole. However Big Dan catches the flag just in time, only to be crushed underneath the falling burning cross: killed by the symbol, so potent in American mythology, of his own moral flaw.

In popular culture as in antiquity, the Cyclops has been employed to illustrate both visually and culturally, what it is to be a human. Those familiar with the *Odyssey* may recognise the underlying power that some films derive from the Homeric narrative; others will enjoy them simply as good stories or for their spectacular imagery. Either way, they demonstrate that even the most abstract elements of the ancient world may some-

times be found in unexpected places.

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